postscript by bawling, tzrbup

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Summary:

Richie Tozier's life is weird. He’s navigating being a trans kid, he just fought an interdimensional, child-eating monster, and now he has a crush on his best friend. Luckily, he has an older cousin who’s already been through all three.

1. the heading

Author's Note:

> things to know: mike wheeler is a trans lesbian
>
> i projected so hard that it turned into one of my favorite stories i've ever told! enjoy.
>
> come say hi if you want @butcheleven

September 22nd, 1989

Dear Mike,

Eddie said I shouldn't start this letter with "hope your tits are out" but I think it will make you laugh so I'm starting with it anyways. Do you remember Eddie? I think you met him when you and Aunt Karen and Uncle Ted were here for July 4th last summer. Anyways, a clown tried to eat me and my friends a few weeks ago. Seriously.

Richie stopped writing and chewed his pen thoughtfully. What more was there to say? He wasn't sure. He figured it would take too long to start from the beginning so he settled for a brief summary.

Okay, it wasn't really a clown. More like a monster that can turn into whatever scares you and THEN tries to eat you once you're scared. Does that make sense? I mean, I know it sounds fucking crazy but I know you'll get it since you and your weirdo girlfriend and practically everyone you know lives for this horror movie shit. I don't know if we killed it or not but Bill doesn't think it's gone for good. It's not supposed to bother us again until we're really old, but maybe your girlfriend could do her nerd magic and see if it's still alive.

He stopped again and reread what he'd put onto the page. Yeah. That was pretty much all there was to it. That he knew of, anyways.

Okay I'm done talking about the clown. School is shitty. Before summer vacation the boys' chorus had a stupid luau themed assembly and after it was over I stole their costumes out of the drama room so I had boys' clothes all summer even if they were dumb as fuck. Eddie made fun of

them pretty much every day. Also I have a crush on Eddie. I figured that since you've been married since you were in the 7th grade you won't think it's stupid. Mom and Dad are still the worst. Has Uncle Ted keeled over yet? I hope so. I guess that's everything I wanted to say. I miss you.

Richie

P.S. Please use my not name if you're going to write me back. My parents will throw away mail with the wrong name. You know how those fuckers are.

*

TO: RACHEL TOZIER
FROM: MICHAEL WHEELER

Richie felt like the names were staring at him. He was hugging the package close to his chest, tight enough that it almost flattened everything out, as he made his way up the narrow staircase to his room.

He slammed his bedroom door shut behind him, dumped the package onto his stained bedspread, and grabbed the penknife he'd stolen from Bill out of his desk drawer. He looked down at the names again and cut into the thick, clear tape holding the box closed. He watched the blade cut down the center line through the label, slicing their names in half. He smiled.

Inside there was a pile of neatly packed clothes—faded jeans, lumpy looking sweaters and shirts. Richie upturned the box and let its contents drop messily onto the bed. Most of them fell in a heap on the floor, creases still visible from where they'd been carefully folded. There was also a pair of white Puma sneakers. They looked old and worn, but they were clean in the way that only someone who cared about the state of their shoes kept their sneakers clean.

Lastly, there was a white envelope that had his name scrawled on its front in small, tidy letters. He tore it open and read.

October 11th, 1989

Dear Richie,

I couldn't stop picturing you biking home from school in the snow in Hawaiian shirts and cargo shorts so I figured I would send you some of my old clothes. Timing wise it worked out, since I'm busy packing up all my stuff right now. I'm finally moving out of my parents' house. I'm not leaving Hawkins yet, I decided to stay here and live with El until she finishes high school. She's only got a year left, not like she needs it, but she has to finish if she wants to get into a good school. At least that's what her dad says. I think she could get into any school in the country without even tr—

Richie pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. This lovesick motherfucker really could not help herself. He skipped ahead a few lines.

In regards to your monster situation: I'm glad you and your friends are alright. I'll ask El to look into it. I'm not sure if she'll be able to find whatever it is without knowing what it looks like, especially if it can shapeshift. I don't know how that works exactly but she might. If you have a picture of it, or could even just try to describe it in your next letter, that would help. For the time being, stay close to your friends and watch out for one another. That's the most important thing. I have not been married I was in 7th grade, asshole. But no, I don't think you having a crush on Eddie is stupid. It's totally normal. Have you told him how you feel? That's pretty much all you need to do. Just be honest and things will work out, I promise. Ask him to the school dance if you guys have one.

Fat chance. School dances sucked ass and Richie didn't have to go to one to know it.

Don't listen to your shitty parents, they don't know anything. Believe me, I've been there. Stick by your friends. Write again soon.

Mike

P.S. El does not have "nerd magic." She's psionic. Read a book for once in your life.

Richie tossed the letter to the side and picked up some of the clothes laying on the ground. He pulled on a pair of jeans, a polo, and a hoodie. He ran to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. He thought he sort of looked like a three-way cross between Stan and

the kids in science club and someone's weird step dad. He *loved* it.

He ran downstairs and dialed Eddie's number from the kitchen phone.

"Hey, Mrs. K. Can you put Eddie on please? It's—no hang on, at least let me finish—it's imperative to our budding romance that I speak with hi—oh, he's not home? Fuck me. No, not you, that's fucking gross—"

There was a buzz and a knock at the front door. Richie muffled Mrs. Kaspbrak's yelling with his palm and listened. There was a solid moment of silence before whoever was at the door starting laying into the doorbell with everything they had. Richie put the phone back to his ear.

"Gotta go, Mrs. K, I think someone's here to murder me."

He hung up the phone, ran to the front door, and pulled back the curtain covering the little window looking out to the front porch.

Eddie Kaspbrak was looking up at him with a frown, a middle finger, and a large stack of comics.

Maybe things would work out after all.

*

November in Hawkins never sat well with Mike.

Even after five years, she could feel it as soon as the leaves turned. The first cold morning she walked outside and could see her own breath, it was like the center of gravity shifted.

Mist curled around her feet as she lifted her bike up and over the tripwire, listening to the thick layer of leaves crunch under her tires as she walked up to the front porch. She leaned the bike against one of the cabin's standing beams and saw a small manila envelope addressed to her lying on the welcome mat. She bent down to pick it up and noticed her own hands in the dim afternoon light. They were smudged with dirt (probably from the handlebars of her bike) and her nails were chipped and black around the edges (probably from

when Nancy had taken her skeet shooting last weekend when she and Jo were visiting from New York).

She made her way inside and into El's room. Well, her room. It didn't *feel* like her room yet, even though she'd been living here for the better part of the last five years. Still, now that it was actually her room, she didn't feel any different. She dodged some of the unpacked boxes around the foot of the bed as she stripped out of her backpack and jacket, flinging the envelope onto the bed.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the distorted floor length mirror that El kept in the far corner of the room. She was wearing one of Nancy's old sweaters. It was slightly too tight, but she liked the way it looked anyways, knitted with patterns of pink and beige and blue. Her curly dark hair looked rumpled and wild after the long bike ride from the library, and her cheeks were flushed in the warmth of the house.

She sat crisscross in the center of the bed and reached for the little package. There was a large lump at one end. She ran her fingers over the paper, trying to ignore the dirt under her cuticles, and felt something hard and bulbous inside. She gripped the tab and opened it in an even, straight line. She dipped her hand inside and pulled out a wad of poorly folded lined paper. It had clearly been ripped out of a spiral notebook, frayed edges still attached and tangling together. One of the corners looked pink and sticky and smelled suspiciously like bubblegum.

She unfolded the paper and a polaroid slipped out into her lap. She looked down at it. Richie was looking up at her. He was smiling, laughing probably, jovially flipping the camera off. His thick glasses made his dark eyes look buggish. She recognized his outfit immediately and smiled: Faded light wash jeans, a red, yellow, and navy colorblocked polo, and white Puma sneakers. His hair was shaggier than she remembered it. It sort of looked like a dead animal or a mop on his head. She returned her attention to the letter in her hands.

November 3rd, 1989

Dear Mike,

How's it hanging homeslice? Thanks for sending the clothes. The cargo shorts were getting me cold as shit and I think my teachers were starting to get suspicious.

Mike looked up as the door creaked open.

"Mike?"

She heard El's soft voice from somewhere in the living room and her heart leapt.

"I'm in here, El!"

There was some muffled shuffling and El's face appeared where the door was standing ajar. It swung softly open to let her through, and swung shut behind her as she toed off her Converse and climbed onto the bed, threading her hands into Mike's curls and pressing her backwards into the comforter. Mike wriggled under her, laughing, trying not to bend the letter in her hand.

"El, careful! Wait, where'd the picture go?"

"What picture?"

"From—from my cousin," Mike sat up, feeling around for the polaroid. She pulled it out from under her legs. "Richie. You remember him right?"

"The mouthbreather?"

"Well, yeah," Mike held up the polaroid for El to see. She made a face. "But go easy on him, he's only thirteen."

El rolled her eyes. She pointed to the letter in Mike's hand.

"What did he say?"

"I don't know, I haven't finished. Should I read it out loud?"

El nodded and tucked her head into the dip between Mike's head and shoulder. Mike cleared her throat and picked up from where she'd left off.

You haven't met my friend Bev but she's a huge badass and would probably have a fat crush on you. Anyways she moved to Portland before school started but came back to Derry last weekend. She brought a bunch of drawings of clothes she's been doing. She said she wants to start a book of stuff that inspires her clothes so she asked to take pictures of me for her book! I sent you one that she didn't take with her. I really don't like having my picture taken but I think your clothes helped. Speaking of friends, listen. I know you told me I should just tell Eddie how I feel but I haven't yet. I'm not brave like you. What if he doesn't like me because of, you know, all this? What if he liked me better as a girl? HELP. I tried really hard to describe what happened with the clown but I can't really. I can't explain it, it's just like a fuzzy TV screen in my brain. I haven't told my friends that I told you but I think I'll have to ask if they can help.

Richie

P.S. I can't send you any girl clothes since mine are ugly and won't fit you but I found this nail polish under my bed and thought you might like it.

Mike set the letter down on the bed and felt around for the manila envelope. Her fingers felt the hard, round shape under paper and she fished it out from behind where El was now snuggled into her side. She pulled out a small bottle of cherry red nail polish and smiled.

"Mike?"

El's voice was soft and a little sleepy in Mike's ear. She opened the bottle of polish and made a dot on her thumbnail. The color reminded her of Christmas.

"Hm?"

"What does he mean by the clown?"

Mike set the bottle on her nightstand and carded her fingers absently through the cropped hair at the back of El's neck as she explained what Richie had told her in his previous letter. El listened intently, her sleepiness quickly replaced by curiosity.

"So some kind of shapeshifter that preys on kids," Mike summarized. She looked down at El, her brown eyes full of concern. "Have you

ever heard of anything like that?"

"No," El shrugged her shoulders. "Only in books and movies."

She sat up and looked at Mike with a difficult expression. She had a habit of trying to make Mike guess what she was thinking when she didn't want to say something out loud. Mike rolled her eyes.

"He didn't make it up, El," Her voice was serious. "I know he can be...like that sometimes but he wouldn't lie about something this dangerous. You've never been to Derry, that place is—"

"Like Hawkins?"

"Worse, way worse." Mike closed her eyes. "There's something bad there."

"I trust you," El reached out a hand and ran her fingers through Mike's curls again. She leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to her open lips. "I don't know if I'd be able to find it if I only had a description, since it can look different whenever it wants. I need more."

Mike smiled and wrapped the fuzzy arms of her sweater around El's neck.

"I'll tell him."

2. the salutation

Summary for the Chapter:

> Mike paints her nails and raids the family photo album. Eddie discovers genderhate. Richie bites the fucking bullet.

Notes for the Chapter:

> love these relaxing kids who care for one another

November 13th, 1989

Dear Richie,

I'll get the important stuff over with first. I talked to El about the clown and she said she's never heard of anything like it. I know I said that a description of it might be enough to help El find it but she isn't sure. Since it can take different forms, she thinks she'll need hard evidence to find it, like a photo or clothes. Maybe you or one of your friends saved something from the encounter? If so, bring it to Hawkins with you when you visit for Christmas.

Mike set her pen down carefully and examined the state of her nails. She'd scrubbed and clipped and moisturized (the dirt was barely noticeable now) before applying a thick coat of the festive red polish. Drying was the worst part. No matter how many lessons she'd gotten from Nancy over the years, she never seemed capable of getting out of the drying process without dings. She blew a little before picking the pen back up.

Your friend Bev sounds really cool! I'm so glad you had fun with the pictures. I love the one you sent, you look better in my old stuff than I ever did, that's for sure. You're super brave. You're one of the bravest kids I know. Stop making Eddie's mind up for him. He's your best friend, he likes you the way you are, no matter if it's as a friend or more. You'll know when it's the right time to tell him.

Mike's gaze drifted away from the lined paper in front of her towards

the camera and pile of old polaroids fanning out from where she was sitting on the floor. She sifted through them and saw her and Nancy raking leaves in the front lawn, Richie chasing Holly around her old living room. El looking adorable at the Snow Ball in ’84.

She turned towards the couch behind her. She could see the top of El’s curly head, flashing with soft light from where she was watching Saturday Night Live on Hopper’s old shitty TV set. Mike heard her saying the lines back to herself under her breath. Mike sighed. Not now. Focus.

Thanks for the nail polish. I’m wearing it and thinking of you whenever I look at my hands. I can’t wait to see you. You can stay at the cabin with us. We might even let you sleep in our bed. I promise to ask El to be nice if you promise not to annoy her. Do we have a deal?

Mike

P.S. Things will get better for you. I sent some photographic proof. Hope you like it.

*

Richie’s head lolled back against the soft mattress of Eddie’s bed. He dug his toes into the plush carpet and gripped his drawn up knees. A rainbow of neon Band-Aids were visible through tears in his jeans from when he’d tried to ride a shopping cart like a soapbox car down the hill behind the library last week.

Derry was getting so fucking boring.

He spent most afternoons at Eddie’s now. Eddie’s mom always bought the best snacks, and Eddie always saved his allowance so he had money to buy the newest comics. Plus, he still had Halloween candy left even though it was nearly halfway through November. This was the mental list of reasons Richie had made to give the other losers whenever they asked him to the arcade or wherever.

The sleeves of one of Mike’s old sweaters hung over his hands as he curled his tongue around a Halloween sucker. He looked at Eddie upside down. He was sitting on the covers of his neatly-made bed

behind him, reading a comic. Eddie felt eyes on him and peeked out from the top of his reading material, peering suspiciously over the bed to see what Richie was doing.

“Who’s it from?”

Eddie nudged his elbow in the direction of Richie’s lap, where Mike’s tidy handwriting lined the paper of her most recent letter.

“It’s from Mike. My cousin Mike, not other Mike.”

“Don’t you usually go to Indiana for Thanksgiving?”

Richie removed the sucker from his mouth and smacked, shaking his head.

“Not this year. We’re going for Christmas. Fucking *sixteen hour* car ride. I’d rather die.”

Eddie’s raised eyebrows told Richie he called bullshit. Mike was something of a living legend among Richie’s friends ever since her visit to Derry in the summer of ’88. Bill and Stan waxed poetically about her to Ben, Bev, and Mike at least once a week, which always left Eddie’s cheeks a little blotchy and put Richie in a decidedly poor mood for the rest of the day.

“What’d she say?”

Richie hesitated.

“I told her about the clown,” Richie watched Eddie’s expression go slack. None of them had mentioned it since the Barrens back in September. “I asked her if her girlfriend could help, you know, with her weird psychic shit. To see if it’s still alive.”

Eddie nodded silently. Richie swallowed thickly.

“Do you think Bill and the others would be mad?”

He half expected Eddie to brush it off, to crack a joke about how they all preferred Mike to him on a good day, but he didn’t.

“No. Bill trusts you, Rich. And if you trust Mike, that’s good enough for the rest of us.”

Richie looked back down at the letter in his lap.

“She said that she needed me to describe it, describe what happened, but I don’t know,” he scrunched up his eyes, trying to picture Neibolt, the sewers, anything, “it’s like it didn’t happen. I can’t picture it. Can you?”

He looked back over his shoulder and saw Eddie close his eyes. He frowned like he was trying hard to remember something, but after a few seconds he shook his head.

“Well now Mike says it won’t work unless they can see a picture of it or something. But we don’t have any fucking proof so I guess it’s no __”

“The library.” Eddie interrupted him. “Remember all the crazy shit Ben kept up in his room? There were a bunch of old pictures and newspapers and stuff. Mike’s been shadowing Mrs. Starret a couple days a week, I bet he could help you find something.”

“Eds, my little genius!”

Richie shouted and jumped to his feet, the papers in his lap tumbling to the floor with a soft thud. He looked down and noticed the corners of several polaroids sticking out of the envelope. He bent down to pick them up.

There were three pictures:

The first was a picture of a very young Mike, maybe six or seven, holding a fat baby with matted dark hair and wearing a pale pink onesie. Richie frowned and flipped to the back. Mike’s handwriting read: *Me and you in 1977. Nice outfit.* Richie scowled and flipped back to the picture. Mike was one to talk. Her hair was cropped shorter than Richie ever remembered seeing it, and she was wearing a pair of those green corduroy overalls they only made for boy toddlers. She looked like a literal toad.

The second picture was almost too much for Richie to take in. He

burst out in a fit of uncontrollable laughter until tears were streaming out from the corners of his glasses. Mike was standing on what he recognized as the staircase at his aunt and uncle's house. She looked absolutely miserable. She was wearing a tan corduroy jacket over a grey sweater and a red tie underneath. Her hair was puffy and mushroom-like. On the back she'd written: *The Snow Ball (school dance), 1984.*

The last picture was recent. The girl in the picture was closest to what Richie recognized as his cousin, but she seemed different than he'd seen her before. She looked radiant. She was smiling wide, laughing maybe, sitting on the floor of a shabby looking room that Richie didn't recognize. Dark ringlets of her curly hair were sticking out everywhere; she was wearing a rosy-colored sweater with a high neck under a pair of denim overalls with the legs cut off into shorts. Her legs were long and graceful, littered with little constellations of freckles. She was painting her toenails the same bright red as her short fingernails. Richie's eyes felt hot when he noticed the little bottle of nail polish he'd sent her sitting next to her left foot.

When Richie looked up, Eddie was watching him with a fond smile. Richie raised his eyebrows and held the pictures out to Eddie.

Richie watched Eddie intently as he laughed at baby Richie, poking at his fat cheeks amusedly. He flipped to the picture of Mike dressed for the school dance and his eyes went as wide as dinner plates.

"I know, she looks RIDICULOUS—her fucking hair, Christ—I can't wait to make Nancy tell me all abo—"

"Take off your glasses, just for a second."

Richie blinked at him. He slid the heavy frames down his nose so that they hung off his ears and Eddie made a sound halfway between a scream and a cackle.

"You guys look *identical*," Eddie was grinning from ear to ear, holding the picture up so that he could see it side by side with Richie's glasses-free mug.

Richie gaped at him.

“Eddie. No. Nope. Absolutely not. Wrong-o. Nada. *Ixnay* on the *identicalyay*,” Richie had his hand over his face and he was shaking his head back and forth in the manner of someone whose entire philosophy of life had just been punctured. “Me? And Mike? Look alike? Edward, you have lost your god damned *fucking* mind.”

“Come *on*, Richie, your family must tease you guys about it, I can’t be the only one—”

“NO! God, Eds, you’re *disturbed*,” Richie dragged his hand down his face so that his eyes were bulging out of their sockets before pushing his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose. “We are not talking about this. Next picture.”

Eddie rolled his eyes and flipped to the last picture. His eyes went wide again, but this time Richie saw the pink on the high points of his cheeks bleed across his features until he was flushed down to the collar of his baseball tee. Richie felt something hit the pit of his stomach like a rock.

“Stop drooling over my cousin, sicko. She’s *happily married*, or did you forget?”

“I didn't *forget*, asshole. And I am *not* drooling, she just,” Eddie’s hands gesticulated wildly. He looked like he was having a minor aneurysm. “She just looks different, that’s all.”

Richie’s magnified eyes narrowed behind his thick lenses. He pointed an accusatory finger at Eddie with his sucker-free hand.

“I know that look, Kaspbrak. I’m the *king* of knowing horny expressions so don’t play dumb with me.”

Eddie’s flushed face went a whole shade darker. He stared very hard at the pictures in his lap and his voice was soft when he replied.

“It’s not like that, Rich.”

“Okay, then what’s it like?”

Eddie didn’t answer him. He busied his hands with organizing the polaroids into a neat stack, offered them back to Richie without

meeting his eyes, and buried his freckled nose back into his comic.

Richie was still standing next to Eddie's bed. He looked down at the polaroids in his hand, confused. For several seconds he tried to mentally backtrack the thread of conversation that had just taken place before deciding that this whole situation was fucking stupid.

He gave a dramatic sigh, stuck his sucker back into the pocket of his cheek, and flopped down face-up onto Eddie's bed. They sat in silence for what felt like hours, the cold plastic of Eddie's candy bucket pressing uncomfortably into his thigh.

"Hey, Eds?"

"Yeah?"

"I like you. You know, *like* like. I like you like *that*."

"I know, Rich."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

Another few minutes of quiet passed between them. Richie could feel his heart beating in his throat when Eddie shifted to lay beside him. The candy bucket sat forgotten between their bodies.

"Rich?"

"Yeah, Eds?"

"I like you, too."

3. the body

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie takes Hawkins.

Notes for the Chapter:

LOL ¯_(ツ)_/¯

this chapter and the next one were meant to be a single chapter but i sort of went off the rails so it's getting split into two sections. part two is almost finished so it should be up within the week.

thanks again to everyone who has supported this story! it really means a lot to me. feel free send me an ask on tumblr @butcheleven.

December 15th, 1989

Dear Mike,

I know I'll be in Hawkins soon but I just wanted to let you know that my friends Mike and Ben helped me find some stuff in the library about the clown. They only had old as hell newspapers and letters so I hope that works. Did I mention I had to go to the library for this? Talk about a snooze fest. Thanks for the pictures. I glued them into my school notebooks. We're getting to Aunt Karen and Uncle Ted's house on Friday night. Will you be there? How will I know where the cabin is? For Christ's sake don't leave me alone with my mom and Uncle Ted.

Richie

P.S. Eddie's my boyfriend now. Yowza.

Mike tried to smooth the crumpled paper of Richie's letter with her mittens as she shifted uncomfortably on the seat of her bike. She smiled to herself, a rush of warm affection running down to the tips of her toes as she slipped it into the pocket of her shearling denim jacket. She'd made the ride to her old house in a record-breaking

twenty-five minutes, and had been parked in the driveway for over an hour.

It was possible that El may have been right when she'd said Mike was over budgeting for time.

Hawkins in December was strangely quiet. Little flurries of snow had been falling since she'd arrived, and now the familiar stretch of Maple Street was completely white, her bike tracks swallowed up by silent drifts of cotton. The dull yellow light from the street lamps and the front windows of the houses made the neighborhood feel uninviting.

Mike heard the crunch of tires and looked up to see an Oldsmobile with wood paneling coming slowly around the corner. It turned and pulled into the Wheeler's driveway. Mike chewed her bottom lip and gripped the handles of her bike.

The car was barely in park before one of the back doors swung open.

Richie burst out of the backseat and ran towards her at full speed, backpack thumping against his back. Mike steadied her feet for impact just in time to catch him in a warm bear hug, lifting his already soaking wet sneakers clean off the pavement.

After a long moment, she kissed the top of Richie's head and set him down. He stared up at her, his glasses askew and his hair already catching snowflakes out of the air. They grinned at one another.

"Hi."

"Hi."

The sound of car doors slamming echoed in the quiet street. Mike felt Richie take her hand as Wentworth Tozier trudged around the car to stand beside them. She tightened her grip on Richie and tried her best to ignore the sudden thudding in her chest.

"Hi Uncle Went, Hi Aunt Maggie."

"Hello there, Michael. Are you heading in? Or on your way out?"

“Oh, no. I’m just on my way back to my girlfriend’s house.”

“Hear that, Rach? Your cousin’s quite the ladies’ man I hear,” Wentworth stepped forward and clapped a hand onto Richie’s shoulder. He winced. “Alright, have a good time with your lady, Michael. Rach, come grab your suitcase, we don’t want to miss your Aunt’s supper.”

He turned back towards the station wagon where Maggie Tozier was busy gathering wrapped gifts out of the backseat. Richie didn’t waste a second. He dropped Mike’s hand and threw a leg over the back of the bike, arms worming around her middle as the words came tumbling out of her mouth.

“I actually promised Richie he could stay with me, so we’re going now.”

Richie’s arms around her squeezed *hard*. He was giving her the signal. It was now or never.

She kicked off from the driveway, and before either Tozier had time to look up from their packed car, they were halfway down Maple Street. Their mingled voices floated back along the houses just before they turned the corner and out of sight.

“DON’T WORRY, I HAVE AN EXTRA TOOTHBRUSH. HE’LL BE FINE!”

“MERRY CHRISTMAS, SUCKERS!”

*

The thrill of the ride lasted about five minutes before Richie realized how cold it was.

He was coatless, gloveless, and very vocal about his imminent death from frostbite for practically the entire trip. Mike steered off onto the cabin driveway as he whined into her ear again.

“How much longer? My dick’s about to fall off. Do you really want to be responsible for that, Mike? I *need* my dick. Sometimes I think it’s all I have going for—oh, what the *fuck* is that?”

The dim lights from the cabin were visible as Mike navigated through the thick patch of beech trees that signaled the tripwire. She stopped suddenly and felt Richie's nose bump against her back. He cursed under his breath.

"That's our *home*, Rich."

"Looks like a real shithole."

Richie rubbed his sore nose as Mike leaned her bike up against a sturdy trunk. She bent down and dusted a drift of snow off the ground so she could see the wire.

"It belongs to El's dad," She stepped over and signaled for Richie to do the same. "He's letting us use it while El finishes school. He and Joyce live a couple miles north of here. You remember Joyce, right?"

Richie shook his head absently as he lifted a sneakered foot up and over the trap.

"Cool story. Still looks like a shithole."

Mike rolled her eyes. She started towards the house but stopped again when she noticed a rusted truck, covered in a blanket of white, parked to her left.

"It looks like Hopper's here."

"Who the hell's Hop—"

They both jumped at the sound of the front door opening. Mike caught Hopper's scent before she could make out his silhouette on the patio—a mishmash of wood chips, cigarettes, and cinnamon. He closed the door firmly behind him and gave a tired half-smile when he turned and saw her. His boots crunched over the fresh snow and he laid a warm hand on her shoulder.

"Hey kid," His gaze drifted down and landed on Richie, who was staring at him open mouthed like a bullfrog. "And… other kid. Jesus, why didn't you tell me there were two of you?"

"Very funny. This is my cousin, Richie. He's visiting from Maine."

Richie elbowed her in the ribs and whisper-yelled.

“Who’s the bear?”

Hopper looked from Richie back to Mike, smacked his lips soundly, and turned to brush the snow off of his windshield without another word.

They watched his truck follow its own headlights until it was swallowed up by trees. Mike turned to Richie with what she hoped was a stern expression. He just raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“You know, in retrospect, that could’ve been way worse.”

It was going to be a long week.

*

The inside of the cabin wasn’t too shabby considering it’s shit-stain exterior.

Richie’s frozen cheeks stung from the sudden heat. His glasses were so fogged up he could barely see, but he was too lazy to take them off. He stood in the doorway and squinted at the small living room: There was a ratted couch, a wooden coffee table covered with books, and a TV that looked older than the goddamn Parthenon.

“Holy shit.”

He felt Mike’s fingers in his hair as she brushed past him, humming to herself. She piled her mittens and jacket on an empty chair sitting at a sticky-looking two-person table. The living room extended into a kitchen (if you could call it that) to the right. On the center back wall, a door stood half open.

Richie slid his backpack off his shoulder and let it plop to the floor beside him. Mike leaned forward from where she was standing, craning her neck to try and see through the gap in the door.

“El? Are you in the bedroom?”

“There’s only two rooms in this dump, Mike. Do the math.”

Richie heard the front door creak behind him and turned just in time to see it slam itself shut. He let out a high-pitched squawk and jumped back, his limp arms and frail fists flung out at the ready.

“El!”

The annoyed cadence in Mike’s voice made him turn back on his heels. A throw pillow smacked him square in the face.

Richie blinked, momentarily stunned by the blitz attack. Ferocious giggles were coming from the far side of the room. He looked up and saw Eleven leaning against the bedroom doorframe.

She was a few inches shorter than Mike. Her cropped hair curled just under her ears, and her honey-brown eyes were lined with long, delicate lashes and sharp eyebrows. She was wearing a pair of black sweatpants and a red Hawkins High A.V. Club t-shirt.

“Hey, motormouth.”

Richie stared a little. He hadn’t seen El in over a year, maybe two. And, although he would’ve rather done the breaststroke in a boiling lake of lava than admit it, he was still sort of afraid of her. Maybe.

“Long time no see, Marvel Girl. How are things going in the Freak Squad of America?”

Mike’s voice floated over from the kitchen sink where she was filling a pot with water.

“Technically, Marvel Girl is an alias for the Phoenix. So really, El is probably closest to the Phoenix, yeah. Power-wise, anyways…”

Richie seized his opportunity when El turned to watch Mike turn on the stove. He picked up the throw pillow and chucked it full force at her head. Without taking her eyes off Mike, she flicked a finger and the pillow changed direction in mid-air. It zoomed back towards Richie and hit him in the face so hard that he lost his balance and

landed on his ass.

"...I guess it depends on whether you're talking about Jean Grey as the Phoenix or Rachel Summers as the Phoenix…"

Richie pushed himself back to his feet and made a running start towards El. If she wanted to play dirty, he wasn't about to bow out. She braced herself against the doorframe and extended her full arm, palm-out.

"...I see her as more of a Rachel Summers, personally. There are actually some interesting narrative similarities if you think about it…"

He was about three feet from tackling El to the floor when he felt himself pressing against an invisible wall. He squirmed against it, his feet running in place. Richie glared up at El and flipped her off in retaliation. She smirked and flicked her fingers again. His glasses slid down the bridge of his nose, his hand flew back, and he poked himself in the eye.

"SHIT!"

"What the *hell* is going on?"

They both froze. Mike was scowling at them from the stove, hands firmly planted on her slim hips. A reindeer dish towel was slung over her shoulder. El quickly slid her hands into the back pockets of her sweats. Richie rubbed at his eye and adjusted his glasses.

"Both of you promised to make an effort, remember? It's been *five minutes*."

"She started it."

"You started it by being in my house, gremlin."

Mike shot a look at El. She sunk a little into her shoulders.

"I want you to shake hands. *Now*."

El rolled her eyes and walked over to Richie. He stuck his tongue out at her quickly before taking her outstretched hand. She gripped him hard and gave a single, forceful shake.

“Christ, that’s a firm grip. Could you be any more of a dyke?”

She gave him an exasperated look.

“No.”

Mike rolled her eyes and pointed a finger at them.

“Alright, I expect you two to get along for the rest of the week. Understood?”

They nodded in unison.

“Good,” She turned back to her boiling water and reached for a tin on one of the rickety shelves to her right. “Rich, you’re sleeping in our room. Why don’t you go settle in, I’ll be there in a minute.”

Richie grabbed his backpack, drew his finger across his throat at El, and sauntered into the bedroom.

It was small like the rest of the place, with a slanted wood-slat ceiling. Most of the room was taken up by a messy, two-person bed that was pushed up against the wall under two single-pane windows. The only other furniture was a skinny wardrobe that was so stuffed full of clothes its doors didn’t close, and a smudgy full-length mirror in the far corner.

Richie moved closer to the mirror so he could see himself. The glass was sort of lumpy, and made parts of his body bulge and stretch like Silly Putty. He thought he looked a little more like he felt.

There was a soft knock on the door. He turned and saw Mike slip inside, closing it gently behind her.

“Want some hot cocoa?” She held out a mug with candy cane stripes

all over it. Steam billowed off the top. “I know you probably shouldn’t have sugar before bed, but as long as you promise to brush your teeth after, I won’t tell.”

She sat on the edge of the bed and patted the space next to her.

“Dismantling the balanced diet one chocolaty drink at a time,” Richie leapt onto the bed and scooted up next to her on his tummy, head cradled in his hands. “I like your style, Wheeler.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

She maneuvered herself so she was sitting crisscross and placed the warm mug in his cupped palms. He sipped lightly off the top and smacked his lips. She was watching him with a curious smile curled around the corners of her pink lips.

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer, weirdo.”

“Aren’t you gonna tell me about Eddie?”

Richie felt his whole face tingle. He tried to duck his head but it didn’t have anywhere to go thanks to the hot chocolate in his hands.

“Are you *blushing*? Oh, that has *got* to be a first.”

“Shut up!”

Mike shook her head, grinning from ear to ear.

“I will not,” She plucked the mug out of his hands. “And neither will you. Spill.”

Richie couldn’t help the huge smile that spread across his face. He buried his head in his arms and laughed. He felt Mike’s free hand creep under the hem of his sweater and squeeze. He laughed harder, wiggling violently and rolling onto his back to escape her fingers.

“Okay! Okay fine, I’ll tell you, Benedick Arnold.”

“It’s Benedict.”

“I know. It was a dick joke, Mike. Keep up.”

He shuffled himself into a sitting position so that they were face to face and hugged his knees to his chest.

“It—it wasn’t really anything special,” He shrugged and picked at a lose thread in his jeans. “I just took your advice and told him.”

“What’d he say?”

“That he already knew,” He smiled and felt his cheeks heating up again. “I guess I’m not very good at being subtle, huh?”

“Yeah. You’re pretty shit at it.”

“Harsh.”

“Honest,” Mike handed the mug back to him. “Continue.”

“I don’t know,” Richie swallowed a huge gulp of hot chocolate and swore loudly when it burned the roof of his mouth. “Things aren’t that different. Except that now he doesn’t try to punch my lights out when I call him cute, so I guess that’s progress.”

“Have you guys kissed?”

“Jeez, pry into my sex life why don’t you,” Mike raised her eyebrows at him. He stared very hard at his knees. “Okay, no. But we’ve held hands a few times.”

“In front of your friends?” Richie shook his head. Mike reached out and ruffled his hair. “That’s okay. You don’t have to tell them yet if you don’t want to. But I’m sure they’ll be happy for you when you do.”

“Yeah,” He took another monster gulp of cocoa. “I know.”

Mike untangled her long legs and pushed herself onto her feet. She

knelt down and rummaged through a couple cardboard boxes from under the bed. She pulled out a pair of grey sweatpants and a plain navy crewneck sweatshirt and laid them on the bed next to Richie.

“You can borrow these to sleep in if you want.”

Richie watched her pull her own pajamas out of the too-full wardrobe. She was halfway out the door when Richie called her name.

“Mike?”

She turned to look at him, a touch of concern falling over her features.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

She made funny sort of expression. It was something between a smile and needing to sneeze. Her voice was very quiet when she answered.

“I love you, too.”

4. the complimentary close

Summary for the Chapter:

> Eleven and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad Christmas Eve. Mike and Richie exchange gifts.

Notes for the Chapter:

> oh el perspective?
>
> there's a scene in this chapter that is heavily based on IT the novel. it might seem a little weird to those who haven't read the book, but i think everyone will get the gist.
>
> love you guys. as always, you can reach me at @butcheleven.

The peace treaty didn't even last ten hours.

When Mike poked her head through the bedroom door at nine the next morning to ask Richie how he wanted his eggs, he was already wearing El's favorite leather jacket and was waist-deep in her side of the wardrobe. The subsequent breakfast was tense to say the least.

It wasn't just the constant bickering that was throwing off Mike's projected holiday utopia. In the days leading up to Christmas, Richie was spending most of his afternoons at the Byers' house with Nancy and Jo, who'd arrived in Hawkins the day after him. Richie and Jo had hit it off immediately. They'd spent most of the day holed up in Jo's old room listening to records. Which was perfectly fine with Mike, if anyone had bothered to ask. Which they hadn't.

Between the third world war brimming under her own roof and Richie's mysterious afternoon rendezvouses with Jo, it was looking less and less likely that any of them was going to bring up the unpleasant business of the clown. And they were running out of time.

Things came to a head on Christmas Eve.

There was a standing Wheeler-Byers tradition of waffles for dinner, circa 1984. In attendance was Mike, El, Richie, Joyce, Hopper, Nancy, Jo, and Will, who was finally back from his first semester at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The evening started out tame. El was too distracted with grilling Will about college to pay any attention to Richie, and Richie was too wrapped up in a heated debate with Jo on whether Wham's *Last Christmas* was better than David Bowie's *Little Drummer Boy* to bother El.

Things started to go south when everyone gathered around the table. Out the corner of her eye, Mike noticed the syrup creeping farther out of Richie's reach one millimeter at a time. It wasn't until he was pressing his finger down on the spout of the whipped cream that all hell broke loose. The can jerked at just the right moment and Richie sprayed himself in the face.

He wiped the excess off the lenses of his glasses, licked his finger clean, and loudly announced to the table that he'd found El's secret stash of weed and advised that she be arrested for child endangerment. Within seconds, the two of them were on their feet, screaming at each other over the table. Mike grabbed Hopper's arm and promptly ushered them out the front door.

The ride home was uncomfortable. The four of them were squeezed into the front seat of Hopper's truck, with Mike between El and Richie to keep the peace. As soon as they were through the cabin door, there was an *explosion* of voices. All three of them were shouting over one another. Skinny limbs were flying everywhere.

Mike yelled until she was out of breath and realized she was getting absolutely nowhere. They were going to have it out one way or another. There was nothing to do but let them get it over with.

"WHY CAN'T YOU JUST SHUT UP FOR TWO SECONDS? ARE YOU REALLY THAT DESPERATE FOR ATTENTION?"

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO CAN'T GO TWO SECONDS WITHOUT TRYING TO FUCKING KILL ME!"

“MAYBE I WOULDN’T HAVE TO IF YOU KEPT YOUR HANDS OFF MY STUFF, KLEPTO.”

“DON’T WORRY, YOU’LL BE RID OF ME SOON ENOUGH. THEN YOU CAN HAVE HER ALL TO YOURSELF AND I’LL GO BACK TO BEING INVISIBLE.”

Richie’s small hands were curled into fists at his side. He looked like he was trying very hard not to cry. El was looking back at him, her mouth hanging slightly open.

After a few seconds of silence, Mike cleared her throat.

“I know emotions are running high right now, but this might be our only chance left to figure out what’s happening in Derry,” They turned towards her looking startled, like they’d forgotten she was even there. “Rich, I know you don’t want to talk about it, but you asked for El’s help for a reason. Tell us what’s going on.”

Richie unclenched his fists and wrapped his arms around himself. Mike walked to his side and sat down on the hardwood floor. Richie and El exchanged a look, then sat.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I don’t remember most of it,” Richie’s voice wavered as he spoke. He picked nervously at his fingernails. “I —I can’t explain it. And it’s not just me, it’s been happening to all of us.”

He stood up and scampered into the bedroom. He returned clutching his backpack and sat back down between them. He unzipped the bag and pulled out a spiral notebook and a messy stack of papers. He laid the notebook out so Mike and El could lean in to read.

“When we realized that we were starting to forget, we made this,” He flipped through a few of the pages. They were filled with shoddily drawn figures and notes in different handwriting. “It’s everything we can still remember. Things we *know* happened, even if we can’t picture them.”

Mike examined the page closest to her. There didn’t seem to be any linear organization to what was written down, like they’d hurried to

put each thought on the page before it slipped away again. Near the bottom there was a list of dates she didn't recognize, like *1906 – Ironworks, 102 dead*. She pointed to them.

"What are these?"

"My friend Ben found out a lot about the town when he—before we met him. There've been a lot of weird accidents and murders and stuff," Richie looked up at Mike with quiet panic in his dark eyes. "Bill figured out that they all happened about twenty-seven years apart."

"So whatever this thing is, it only attacks every twenty-seven years," She held his gaze. "Do you know where it goes?"

"There's this house."

Richie closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath. He flipped through a few more pages and landed on one with a decently drawn map of Derry. There were green lines that ran down some of the streets.

"These lines are the sewers. And this," He pointed to where all the lines intersected. "That's—that's where it lives, underground. I know we went down there to save Bev, but that part is the fuzziest."

El's eyebrows shot up, a look that Mike knew meant she was impressed.

"You mean you fought it?"

Richie turned to her with a deadly serious face.

"We kicked it's fucking ass," He turned back to Mike. "But it—I don't know, it went farther underground, I guess."

"And you don't know if you killed it. And if it survived, you know it's coming back."

Richie nodded. He reached for the other papers and spread them out around the notebook. There were old newspaper clippings and city documents. Handwritten letters. Telegrams.

“This is everything we could find,” Richie finished setting the last few down. “I wasn’t supposed to take them from the library, but my friend Mike works there. He helped me sneak them out.”

One of the headlines caught Mike’s eye: *Ironworks Explodes at Annual Easter Egg Hunt, 88 Children Dead.* There were some black-and-white photographs of the aftermath, dead bodies strewn across a blackened field.

“There’s something else. I—I don’t know if it will help but,” Richie rummaged in his backpack again. He pulled out a crumpled, grey ringer t-shirt and a folded up piece of paper. He set them on top of the notebook. “This is what I was wearing when it—when I first saw it.”

Mike reached for the folded paper and opened it.

Police Department. City of Derry. MISSING. Richie Tozier, 13 Years Old. Last Seen July 4. Description: Date of Birth: March 7, 1976. Male. 13 yrs. Height: 61 inches. Weight: 90 lbs. Brown Hair. Brown Eyes. Glasses. Wearing “Freese’s” T-Shirt. Faded Black Shorts. Grey Canvas Sneakers.

Mike looked from the paper in hand back to the t-shirt, trying to piece it together. It didn’t make any sense. The poster couldn’t be real —they would’ve printed information for *Rachel*, not Richie.

“Rich, what is this?”

“It—I don’t really remember,” He scrubbed away a tear that was trailing down his cheek. “It made it to scare me.”

Mike looked at El. She was eyeing everything Richie had set out, brows creased with concentration.

“El?” She looked up and met Mike’s eyes. “Do you think you can you give it a try?”

She chewed on her bottom lip and reached for the t-shirt. She held it loosely in her hands with her eyes closed, like she was listening for something. After a long moment, she opened her eyes and turned to Richie.

“I can do it.”

*

Dark.

There was just dark. Dark above, dark below, dark on either side. It was like waking up in the middle of the night, trying to place yourself before your eyes had time to adjust. Except they didn't. Not here.

This place didn't have a smell or feel, but if it had, it would've smelled and felt damp. Like used towels on a bathroom floor, or loads of laundry that sat in the washer for too long. It was familiar, El thought as she lifted herself to her feet, watching her sneakers disrupt pools of water that weren’t wet.

She didn't visit this place often anymore. She'd never much liked it here, visited out of necessity rather than fascination after she'd first started. Nowadays there was hardly any reason to come at all. Occasionally she checked in on Terry, or Kali, or even Hopper if she was too lazy to ride her bike over to the Byers’ property. And any night Mike was away, El went to her. But she hadn't left since summer before last, when she'd spent a week in Maine.

Cavernous emptiness stretched around her. She wanted to call out, for Mike, for someone. But she stayed quiet, moving through the dark step by careful step, not knowing what she was looking for.

- *Who are you and why do you come to Me?*

The voice was everywhere all at once. It was right behind her, but at the same time it was echoing around her like it was being played from a loudspeaker. She clapped her hands over her ears, but it was in her head.

She turned on her heel so fast she almost lost her footing. There, just a few yards away, she saw It—or as near to It as could be managed. Her mind looped around itself trying to make sense of what was in front of her. It was massive, and Its spindled legs were reaching out towards her.

The eyes were obstructed from her line of sight, but she could see their orange, luminous halo peeking out through layers of jagged flesh. When she spoke, she couldn't tell if it was out loud or just in thought.

Eleven. Who are you?

There was a beat of silence. She could feel something worming into her, and she knew It was looking into her the same way she was looking into It. The halos of orange light were getting brighter. Soon she would see them. She didn't know how, but she knew she didn't have much time.

- I'm like you, monster.

No. You hurt people, children. Where are you?

- Sleeping.

Where are you from?

- Don't ask questions you know the answer to, monster. This is where I existed, this is where I have always existed. You know this place, know what comes from the dark when you're not careful. But here I am eternal.

Something was wrong.

It was reaching into her again, she felt It squeezing her from the inside out. She struggled to breathe. But this wasn't really It, or not all of It. It was somewhere closer. She felt herself moving again, knew It wasn't paying attention to her as she slipped through another layer of darkness. She was going down tunnels, some kind of metal cylinders. She was underground. She saw sticky threads and bones woven into an abominable nest. She was close.

No. No, you're here. I know where you are. I can see you. I'm almost there.

- You think you see me? You see only what your mind will allow.

It laughed horribly and gripped her tighter. With her last breath, she crawled over the side of the nest and there It was—dead asleep, It's

horrible legs curled into Its abdomen.

I found you.

She extended her palm towards It's limp form and felt the energy moving out of her like a wall. It *screamed*. She could hear It everywhere—underground, ricocheting off the endless darkness where she was still standing.

There was a flash of orange light and she let go.

*

"El, it's me. It's *Mike*."

El gasped out a loud scream and writhed in Mike's arms. Mike gripped her tighter, holding her wrists to her chest to stop them from clawing at her throat. Warm blood dripped from her nose onto Mike's hand.

"You're home, you're safe now. You're *safe* now."

Mike pulled away the pair of black stockings El had tied around her eyes. She smoothed a hand tenderly across her forehead and kissed it. El turned and pressed herself into Mike's chest, silent tears soaking into the wool of her Christmas sweater.

Richie was watching them with glassy eyes from a few feet away.

Mike gave him a weak smile. *Everything is going to be okay*. She lifted an arm away from El and held it out, inviting him over to her. *I promise.*

He scrubbed his hands over his face again, smearing tears across the blotchy red of his cheeks, and shakily got to his feet. He stepped towards Mike's outstretched hand, tangled his fingers in hers, and tugged.

Her heart backflipped in her chest.

Mike tucked her other arm securely under El's knees and lifted them slowly off the floor. She clung tightly to Mike's shoulders. Mike could

feel wet eyelashes fluttering against her neck as Richie gently pulled her into the bedroom.

He shoved some clothes and candy wrappers to the floor before climbing into his nest of sheets and blankets. He shook them out a little, flinging their corresponding corners to the edges of the mattress, and patted the empty space beside him. Mike lowered El onto the right side, tucked her favorite quilt snugly around her, then climbed over and settled between them. Richie nuzzled into one arm, and she held tight to El with the other.

They fell asleep with the lights still on. Snow fell steadily outside the window panes over their heads, coating the world with white as Christmas Eve turned into Christmas Day.

*

Christmas Day was shaping up to be one of the best of Richie's entire sorry life.

Strands of colored lights covered the walls and the ceiling of the Byers' living room, and torn wrapping paper in a hundred different patterns covered the floor. The smell of freshly baked bread and bacon and coffee wafted through the air. One of Hopper's old Christmas records was playing scratchily in the corner.

Richie was sitting on the couch. The house was quiet, since the rest of the family had decided to go for a walk down Mirkwood. He squinted down at the game of Tetris he was losing on his new Game Boy—a gift given to him by nearly everyone by a few dollars.

Presents had been exchanged personally, not all at once. Richie's favorite of these was with El, who'd dropped a single cigarette into his open palm when Mike and Will were busy discussing the changes to class leveling in the handbook of her new second edition of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons.

Richie heard whistling and lifted his head. Mike waltzed happily out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a candy cane dish towel. She spotted him and smiled. He felt the cushion dip as she joined him on the tattered couch.

“So you like it? El plays mine pretty much every day. I really think handheld is the future, it’s so innovative.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Richie waved an elbow at her, barely taking his eyes off the screen. “Eddie’s gonna be so jealous. I can’t *wait* to see the look on his mug.”

Mike laughed and twirled her fingers through his unruly hair. It was even worse than usual after going unbrushed in the madness of gathering gifts and piling into Hopper’s truck earlier that morning. *Wait, shit.* Richie jumped to his feet so suddenly that he nearly dropped his Game Boy.

“Oh *fuck*. I almost forgot,” He set it gently on the ground and shouted over his shoulder as he made for the hallway. “I’ll be right back!”

He ran down the hall and ducked into Jo’s room. He shuffled through a pile of cassettes on the bed until he spotted the one with his own handwriting on the front. He grabbed it and ran back to the couch where Mike was waiting. He held the cassette behind his back and shuffled around her to reclaim his spot on the sofa.

“Okay, close your eyes,” Mike’s eyes narrowed suspiciously before they slipped shut. “Now hold out your hands.”

She cupped her palms and lifted them. For a second, Richie just looked at her. El had tied a red ribbon in her hair, and her freckled cheeks were stained pink from being in the hot kitchen. He reached out a finger and wrapped it around one of the loose curls on her shoulder. She jumped when she felt it and Richie felt warm all over.

He placed the cassette into her open hands.

“Okay, open,” Her eyes fluttered and looked down at the tape. *Sexy Lesbian Jams, Vol. 1*. “What d’you think? Jo showed me how to record with a tape deck.”

“Wait, you—you made this? This is what you’ve been doing over here all week?”

“Yeah, I mean,” Richie shrugged. “First, I had to pick out the songs that reminded me of you. And I fucked up recording on the first few,

but—”

Mike lunged forward and threw her arms around him. His open mouth tasted the polyester of her sweater, but it was worth it. He wrapped his arms around her waist and held on tight. When she pulled back, she was wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

“I thought you were getting sick of me.”

“What?"

“You’ve been over here so much,” She ran her thumbs over the plastic case. “I figured you’d rather hang out with Nancy and Jo.”

Richie couldn’t help the bark of laughter that burst out.

“*No*. Noooo, no,” He leaned against her shoulder. “I just felt like making you something, you know. Something special.”

“Yeah, I do,” Richie felt her voice rumble against his ear. “What if I told you I had another gift for you?”

Richie sat upright and stared at her. He pointed to the Game Boy at his feet.

“But I thought—”

“This one’s special. Just from me.”

She disappeared into the kitchen for a few seconds, and reappeared holding a box wrapped in newspaper comics. Richie gleefully tore the paper away. It was a shoebox. He ran his fingers over the lid and noticed Mike’s familiar neat handwriting at one of the corners:

Boy Survival Kit

He eyed her curiously as he removed the lid and dove his hands into several layers of tissue paper. He fished out two packages of nude pantyhose, a pack of boxers, a tie that looked like it had been stolen from Uncle Ted, and a small folded piece of paper.

“Either you’re trying to get me suspended for indecent exposure, or

I'm missing something."

Mike plucked one of the packs of pantyhose off his lap and pointed to the label at the top.

"Alright, so these are the control top ones. See how they have a wide band at the top? It usually covers your belly, but if you cut them right here," she traced her fingers delicately across the legs, just where they met the top of the band, "You can use it up here."

She gently poked his chest, just above his heart. He felt his pulse speed up and swallowed the thick lump forming in the back of his throat. Mike shrugged, her voice soft as she continued.

"I don't know if you need it yet, and I know it isn't the best solution, but I figured you could try it and see how it goes. But hey, you're forgetting the most important part."

She reached across his lap and tapped the folded piece of paper lying on his thigh. He picked it up and opened it. Inside, there was more of Mike's tidy scrawl. He read:

This certificate entitles the recipient to doctor's visits with Mike and El whenever he's ready

Mike handed the pantyhose back to him. He fiddled with the fabric, trying to work up the nerve to say something. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Mike reached out and squeezed his fingers in hers.

And for once, he knew he didn't have to say anything.